

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 13

Going in and out

Part: 1

Chapter: 103

Karly- Look at this old photo

The city of Nevaeh, and its mother of
the past.

The man in uniform moved lazily, not
paying attention. Olivia accelerated, edging around
him, and heading towards the door.

He was still shouting something at us,
and everyone was holding out, frantically waving to
prevent the next car from following our bad
example.

The man at the door was wearing a
matching uniform. As we approached him, the
crowd of tourists passed by, accumulating on the

sidewalks, looking curiously at the insistent and flashy Porsche.

The guard entered the middle of the street in front of us. Olivia carefully tilted the car before stopping.

The sun was beating against my window as I looked out now, and she was in the shadows. She quickly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritated expression and tapped on his window angrily.

She rolled the window halfway, and I watched him do a double take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

'I'm sorry, only tour buses allowed in the city today, miss,' he says in English, with a heavy accent. He apologized to both of us now, as if he wanted to hear better news for the woman of striking beauty like us.

'It's a private visit,' Olivia said, flashing a cute flirty seductive smile.

Then there she reached her hand through the window, in the sunlight.

I froze until at that point I realized she was wearing a tanned glove.

She took her hand, still raised by typing her window, and pulled him into the car some. She put something in her palm and folded her fingers around her, saying you were going.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and looked at the thick silver roll he was now holding. The outside ticket was a thousand dollar bill.

'Is this a joke?' He mumbled.

Olivia's smile was blinding.

'Only if you think it's funny.'

He looked at her, his eyes looking big.

I looked nervously at the clock on the dashboard. If Marcel stuck to his plan, we only had five minutes left.

'I'm in a bit of a hurry,' she says with a smile.

The defender blinked twice, then pushed the silver inside his garment. He walked away from the window and waved at us. None of the

passing souls seemed to notice the hushed exchange. Olivia drove downtown, and we both sighed with satisfaction.

The street was very narrow, paved with the same shades of color as the faded cinnamon-brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It was like an alley.

Many red flags decorated the walls, spaced a few meters apart, flapping in the wind that whistled in the narrow alley. There were a lot of people, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

'A little further,' Olivia encouraged me; I was clinging to the doorknob, ready to throw myself in the street as soon as she said the word.

She drove in rapid thrusts and sudden stops, and people in the crowd clenched their fists on us and said angry words that I was glad I couldn't understand.

She turned on the small path that could not have been intended for cars; Shocked people had to sneak into the doors that we scratched by.

We found another street at the end. The buildings were bigger here; they thought themselves together on it so that no sunlight touched the sidewalk- the red flags flying on either side almost met.

The crowd was thicker here than anywhere else. Olivia stopped the car. I had the door open before we stopped.

She pointed out where the street has widened into a bright opening point. 'There was at the southern end of the square. Cross straight, to the right of the clock tower. I'll find a way around...

Her breath suddenly took, and when she spoke again, her voice was a sister.

'Are they everywhere?'

I froze in place, all the same, and all that, she pushed me out of the car. 'Forget them. You have two minutes. Come on, Bell, come on! she shouted as she got out of the car and talked about it.

I kept seeing Olivia melt into the shadows. I didn't stop to close my door behind me. I pushed a heavy woman out of my way and ran

flat, head down, paying little attention to anything all the same and all, uneven stones under my feet.

As I left the dark lane, I was blinded by sunlight beating down into the main square. The wind that became entangled in me, throwing my hair in my eyes, and blinding me more. It was no wonder I didn't see the wall of flesh until I had slapped into it.

There was no way, no crevice between the tight bodies.

I pushed against them furiously, fighting hands that repulsed. I heard exclamations of irritation and even pain as I fought my way through, all the same, and all, none were in a language I understood.

The faces were a blur of anger and surprise, surrounded by the ever-present red.

A young woman with dark brown hair scowling on me, and the green and white scarf wrapped around her neck looked like a horrible wound. A child, raised on a man's shoulders to see above the crowd, smiled at me, his lips distended on a set of plastic angel fangs.

The crowd was jostling around me, turning me in the wrong direction. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I would never keep my course straight.

All the same and all, both hands on the clock highlighted the unforgiving sun, and, although I pushed viciously against the crowd, I

knew I was too late. I wasn't halfway there. I wasn't going to go.

I was stupid, slow, and human, even though I'm not always stupid, and we were all going to die because of it.

I was hoping Olivia would come out. I hoped that she would see me in a dark shadow and know that I had failed so that she could go home to Ray.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear the sound of discovery: the halex, perhaps the cry, as Marcel came into someone's point of view.

Nevertheless, there was a pause in the crowd- I could see a space bubble coming.

I pushed frantically towards it, not realizing until I bruised my shins against the bricks that there was a large square fountain placed in the center of the square.

I was almost crying with relief when I threw my leg overboard and ran across the water on my knees. It sprayed all around me as I beat my way through the pool.

Even in the sun, the wind was frigid, and the humidity made the cold painful.

Similarly, the fountain was very wide; it allowed me to cross the center of the square, then some in a few seconds.

I didn't take a break when I hit the far edge- I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the mass of people.

They were moving easier for me now, avoiding the icy water that splashed with my dripping clothes as I ran. I looked at the clock once again.

A deep and burgeoning chime echoed in the square. He was beating in the stones under my feet. The children were crying, covering their ears. And I started screaming while I was running.

'Marcel!' I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was out of breath with effort. Yet I kept screaming.

The clock went off again. I ran in front of one in his mother's arms as her hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight.

A circle of tall men, all dressed in red blazers, issued warnings as I passed through them. The clock went off again and again.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a pause in the crowd, the space between the sightseers that floor aimlessly around me.

My eyes looked over the vast narrow, dark passage to the right of the large square building under the tower.

I couldn't see the street level there were still too many kids and teenagers in the way.

The clock struck again, and the rings howled.

Part: 2

Defeated

Just like me, he's gone...

It was harder to see now, more than ever. Without the children, teenagers, and pre-teens, to break the wind, he whipped me in the face and burned my eyes.

-And-

For my part, I could not be a hundred percent certain if that was the reason behind my tears, or if I cried in defeat as the clock hands rounded the face again, and the bell became more blurred.

A large family of ten stood closest to the opening of the driveway.

Both girls wore blue dresses, with
matching ribbons tying their dark hair back.

The father was neither small nor tall.

It looked like I could see something
bright in the shadows, just above his shoulder.
I rushed to them, trying to see beyond
the scathing tears. The clock hands were spinning,
and the little girl was clenching her fingers around
one of the boy's long fingers.

The older girl, just tall on her mother,
kissed her mother's body and looked in the shadows
behind them.

As I watched, she killed herself on her
mother's elbow and pointed to the darkness. The
clock ticked and ticked, and I was so close to it now.

I was close enough to hear his high-pitched voice. His father looked at me with surprise now that I was bored of them, shaving Marcel's name over and over again.

The eldest daughter laughed and said something to her mother, gesticulating again impatiently in the shadows.

I swerved around the father, he squeezed the baby out of my way and sprinted for the dark violation behind them as the clock rolled over my head.

'Marcel, no! I gave in to myself, all the same, and everything, my voice was lost in the cry of the chime.

I could see it now. And I could see he couldn't see me.

It was him, no hallucination this time at all. Then I realized that my illusions were more imperfect than I had realized; they had never done him justice.

Marcel stood motionless like a statue, a few meters from the mouth of the alley. His eyes were closed, the rings under them deep purple, his arms relaxed on his sides, his palms facing forward.

His expression was very peaceful; as if he were dreaming of pleasant things. The marble skin of his chest was bare; there was a small pile of white cloth at his feet. The light reflected from the sidewalk of the square shone dimly from his skin.

I had never seen anything so beautiful even as I ran, panting and screaming, I could

appreciate it. And the last seven months didn't mean anything. And his words in the forest meant nothing. And it didn't matter if he didn't want me. I would never want anything anyway and all that, him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock rose ahead, and it took a big step towards the light.

'No! I screamed.' Marcel, look at me! He wasn't listening. He smiles very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him directly on the way to the sun.

I slammed the door so hard that the force would have thrown me to the ground if his arms hadn't caught me and held me back. He took my breath away and broke my head back.

His dark eyes opened slowly as the clock
rose again.

He looked at me with a quiet surprise.
'Unbelievable,' he says, his exquisite voice
full of wonder, a little amused. Joh was right.

'Marcel, I was still trying to halter, and
my whole voice had no sound. You have to come
back to the shadows. You've got to move!

He seemed perplexed. His hand grazed
gently against my cheek. He didn't seem to notice
that I was trying to force him to come back. I
could have pushed against the walls of the alley
for all the progress I was making.

The clock went up, however, and not
everyone reacted.

It was very strange because I knew we were both in mortal danger.

Yet, at that time, I felt good.

All in all, I could feel my heart running through my chest, blood pulsating hot and fast in my veins again. My lungs filled deep with the sweet smell that came from his skin. It was as if there had never been a hole in my chest. I was not perfectly healed, however, and everything, as if there had been no injury in the first place.

'I can't believe how fast he was. I didn't feel anything that they are very good,' he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair. His voice was like honey and velvet. 'Death, which sucked honey from your breath, had no power yet over your beauty,' he

murmured, 'and I recognized the line spoken by Romeo in the grave.' The clock exploded its final chime 'You feel the same as always,' he continued. So maybe it's hell. I don't care. I'm going to take it. 'I'm not dead,' I interrupted.

'And neither do you! Please, Marcel, we have to move. They can't be far away!

I wrestled in his arms, and his forehead crisscrossed in confusion.

'What was it?' He asked politely. 'We are not dead, not yet!' However, we need to get out of here before the understanding of the department falters on his face while I was talking.

A few moments before, like, I could finish, he suddenly ripped off the edge of the

shadow, making me spin effortlessly so that my back was tight against the brick wall, and his back was for me as he faced me far down the alley. His arms spread wide, protective, before me.

I looked under his arm to see two dark shapes coming out of the darkness.

'Greetings, gentlemen,' Marcel's voice was calm and pleasant on the surface. 'I don't think I'm going to need your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you want to send my thanks to your masters.'

'Are we going to take this conversation to a more appropriate place?' A soft voice murmured menacingly.'

'I don't think it's going to be necessary.' Marcel's voice was more difficult now.

'I know your instructions, Fredric.'

I did not break any rules.

'Fredric just wanted to emphasize the proximity of the sun,' says the other shadow in a soothing tone. They were both concealed in smoky grey coats that reached the ground and corrugated in the wind.'

'Let's find a better cover.'

'I will be right behind you,' said Marcel dryly. Bell, why not go back to the square and enjoy the festival?'

'No, bring the girl,' said the first shadow, injecting a cold-blooded murmur.

'I don't think so.' The pretext of civility has disappeared. Marcel's voice was flat and icy. His weight changed infinitely, and I could see that he was preparing to fight.

'No... I said the word.'

'Sh-h,' he murmured, 'only for me.'

'Fredric,' the second shadow, more reasonably savvy.

'Not here. He turned to Marcel.' Aron would just like to talk to you again if you've decided not to force our hand after all.

'Definitely,' agrees Marcel.

'All the same and everything, the girl becomes free.'

'I'm afraid it's not possible,' says the polite shadow with regret.

'We have rules to follow.'

'Then I fear that I will not be able to accept Aron's invitation, Eamettri.'

'That's fine,' Fredric purrs. My eyes adapted to the deep shadow, and I could see that Fredric was very tall, tall, and thick on his shoulders. Its size reminded me of Emmah.

'Aron will be disappointed,' signed Eamettri.

'I am sure he will survive the disappointment,' replied Marcel.

Fredric and Eamettri flew closer to the mouth of the alley, extending slightly so that they could come to Marcel on both sides.

They wanted to force him deeper into the alley, to avoid a scene. No reflected light found

access to their skin; they were safe inside their hooded coats.

Marcel did not move an inch. It was meant to protect me.

Suddenly, Marcel's head was whipping around, towards the darkness of the winding alley, and Eamettri and Fredric did the same, in response to a sound or movement too subtle for my senses.

'We're going to behave, are we going to?' A lilting voice told me in my head.

'There are young girls present.'

Olivia stumbled slightly on Marcel's side; his relaxed position. There was no indication of underlying tension. She looked so small, so fragile. His little arms wandered around like a children's house.

Yet Eamettri and Fredric wash, their coats swirling slightly like a gust of wind winding down the alley. Fredric's face soured. They didn't even like numbers.

'We are not alone,' she reminded them. Eamettri looked over his shoulder. A few meters from the square, the little family, with the girls in their red robes, looked at us.

The mother spoke urgently to her husband, her eyes on the five or two of us. She looked aside when Eamettri met her gaze. The man walked a few steps into the square and tapped one of the men in red blazers on the shoulder.

Eamettri shook his head. 'Please, Marcel, let's be reasonable,' he said.

'Let's go,' Marcel agreed. And we're going to leave quietly now, without the wisest person.

Eamettri sighed with frustration. 'At least we'll talk more privately.

-Then-

Six men in red joined the family looking at us with anxious expressions. I was very aware of Marcel's protective position in front of me- that's for sure what caused their alarm. I wanted to shout at them to run away. Marcel's teeth came together audibly. No, that's not it.

Fredric smiles- some.

'Enough already.'

The voice was high, Roseau, and it came from behind us.

Part: 3

Unbreakable

Looked at, I took a look under... Marcel's other arm to see a small dark shape coming towards us. By the way, the edges of the beak, I knew it would be another one of them.

Who else?

At first, I thought it was a young boy. The newcomer was as small as Olivia, with lank, pale brown hair cut short. The body under the mantle- which was darker, almost black- was thin, and androgynous. All the same and everything, the face was too pretty for a boy. The face with wide eyes and full lips would make a Botticelli angel look like a gargoyle.

Even taking into account dull purple irises.

His size was so insignificant that the reaction to his appearance confused me. Fredric and Eamettri immediately relaxed, retreating from their offensive positions to blend into the shadow of the overhanging walls.

Marcel abandoned and relaxed his position so all the same and all, in defeat.

'Jane,' he sighed with gratitude and resignation.

Olivia folded her arms over her chest, her expression was impassive.

'Follow me,' said Jane, her childish voice monotonous. She turned her back on us and silently drifted into the darkness.

Fredric made a gesture to get us there first, smiling.

Olivia walked after little Jane at once. Marcel wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me next to her. The aisle tilted slightly downwards as it narrowed. I looked at him with frantic questions in his eyes, all the same, and everything, he just shook his head. Although I couldn't hear the others behind us, I was sure they were there.

'Well, Olivia, Marcel said conversationally that we were walking.' I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you here.

'That was my mistake,' replied Olivia in the same tone. 'It was my job to set the record straight.'

'What happened?' His voice was polite as if he were barely interested. I imagined it was because of the listening ears behind us.

'It's a long story.' Olivia's eyes wavered towards me and away. 'In short, she jumped off a cliff, however, and not everyone was trying to commit suicide.

Bell is all about extreme sports these days.

I flushed and turned my eyes straight ahead, facing the dark shadow that I could no longer see. I could imagine what he meant in Olivia's thoughts now. Near drownings, stalking angels, werewolves friends...

'Uh,' said Marcel, with curvature, 'and the relaxed tone of his voice was gone.'

There was a loose curve at the alley,
always tilted down, so I didn't see the dead-end
square coming until we reached the flat,
windowless, brick face. Little Jane was intromit.

Olivia did not hesitate, did not break the
rhythm as she walked towards the wall. Then,
with easy grace, she crept into an open hole in the
street.

It looked like a drain, sunk into the
lowest point of paving. I hadn't noticed it until
Olivia disappeared, though, and all that, the big
one was halfway there. The hole was small and
black.

I hesitated.
'Everything is fine, Bell,' said Marcel in a
low voice. Olivia's going to catch you.

I peeked at the dodgy hole. I imagine he would have gone first, if Eamettri and Fredric had not waited, smug and silent, behind us.

I crouched down, swinging my legs in the narrow gap.

'Olivia? I whispered, my voice trembling.
'I'm here, Bell,' she reassured me. His voice came from below to make me feel better.

Marcel took my wrists- his hands felt like stones in winter- and lowered me into the darkness.

'Ready?' He asked.

'Let her go,' Olivia called.
I closed my eyes, so I couldn't see the darkness, scribbling them together in terror, squeezing my mouth shut so as not to scream.

Marcel let me down.

It was quiet and short. The air whipped me for half a second, and then, with a silencer, while I was exhaling, Olivia's arms grabbed me.

I was going to have bruises; his arms were very hard. She held me up straight.

He was weak, however, and all, not black at the bottom. The light from the hole above provided a faint glow, reflecting damply from the stones under my feet. The light disappeared for a second, and then Marcel was a slight white glow beside me. He put his arm around me, holding me close to his side, and began to tow me quickly forward.

I wrapped both arms around his cold waist and tripped and tripped my way across the

uneven stone surface. The sound of the heavy grid sliding over the drain hole behind us sounded with a metal purpose.

The dark street fire was quickly lost in the dark. The sound of my amazing footsteps resonated through the black space; it sounded very wide, all the same, and all I could not be sure of. There were no sounds other than my frantic heartbeat and my feet on the wet stones, except for once when an impatient sigh murmured from behind me.

Marcel, held me firmly. He reached his free hand through his body to hold my face, too, his smooth thumb tracing on my lips. Every once in a while, I could feel his face in my hair. I realized

it was the only meeting we'd have, and I thought I'd be closer to him.

For now, I felt like he wanted me, and that was enough to catch up with the horror of the underground tunnel and the prowling angels behind us. It was probably nothing more than guilt, the same guilt that forced him to come here to die when he thought it was his fault that I had committed suicide. All the same and all, I felt his lips press silently against my forehead, and I didn't care what the motivation was. At least I could be with him before I die.

It was better than a long life.

I wish I'd asked him exactly what was going to happen now. I desperately wanted to know how we were going to die as if it was going

to somehow improve it, knowing in advance. All the same and all, I could not speak, even in a whisper, surrounded as we were. The others could hear everything- my every breath, my heart rate.

The path under our feet continued to tilt downwards, taking us deeper into the ground, and it made me claustrophobic. Only Marcel's hand, soothing against my face, prevented me from shouting.

I couldn't tell where the light came from, however, and all of that slowly became dark gray instead of black.

We were in a low, arched tunnel. Long trails of ebony moisture were not on the grey stones as if they were bleeding in ink.

I was shaking, and I thought it was out of fear. It wasn't until my teeth started chatting together that I realized I was cold. My clothes were still wet, and the temperature under the city was wintery. Just like Marcel's skin.

He realized it at the same time as me, and let me go, keeping only my hand.

'N-n-no,' I chatted, 'I threw my arms around him.' I don't care if I froze.

Who knew how much time we had left? His cold hand crumples against my arm, trying to warm me up with friction.

We rushed into the tunnel, or it was like hurrying for me. My slow progress irritated someone- I guessed Fredric- and I could hear him sigh from time to time.

At the end of the tunnel were a grate-the iron bar rusts, all the same, and everything, thicker than my arm. A small door made of thinner, intertwined bars was open. Marcel sneaked through and rushed to a larger, brighter stone room. The grille slammed closed with a clang, followed by the slamming of a lock. I was too scared to look behind me.

On the other side of the long room was a low and heavy wooden door. It was very thick, as I could say because it was so open.

We walked through the door, and I looked around with surprise, relaxing automatically. Next to me, Marcel stretched out, his jaw clenched.

VERDICT WE WERE IN A BRIGHT AND MUNDANE CORRIDOR. The walls were

white, the floor lined with industrial grey. The common rectangular fluorescent lamps were spaced evenly with the ceiling. It was warmer here, for which I was grateful.

This room seemed very benign after the gloom of the macabre stone sewers.

Marcel did not seem to agree with my assessment. He shone darkly down the long corridor, towards the little black-wrapped figure at the end, standing by an elevator.

He shot me, and Olivia walked on my other side. The heavy door creaked behind us, and then there was the thud of a bolt sliding home.

Jane waited by the elevator, a hand holding the doors open for us. His expression was apathetic.

Once inside the elevator, the three angels who belonged to the ministry relaxed further. They pushed back their coats, dropping the hoods back on their shoulders. Fredric and Eamettri were both slightly olive-skinned- he looked weird combined with their chalky pallor. Fredric's black hair was short, however, and all, Eamettri waved on his shoulders. Their irises were purple deep around the edges, darkening until they were black around the pupil. Underneath the shrouds, their clothes were modern, pale, and non-descriptive. I curled up in the corner, grinding Marcel's teeth. His hand is still rubbing against my arm. He never took his eyes off Jane.

The elevator ride was short; we went into what looked like a chic office reception area.

The walls were paneled, the floors lined with a thick deep green. There were no windows, all the same, and all, large light paintings of the Tuscan countryside hung everywhere as replacements.

Pale leather sofas were arranged in comfortable clusters, and the shiny tables held crystal vases full of brightly colored bouquets. The smell of flowers reminded me of a funeral home.

In the middle of the room was a high counter made of polished mahogany. I screamed in amazement at the woman behind her.

She was tall, with dark skin and green eyes. She would have been very pretty in any other company. Because she was as human as I was. I didn't understand what this human woman was

doing here, totally at ease, surrounded by freeloaders.

She smiled politely at the front desk.
'Hello, Jane,' she said. There was no surprise in her face as she watched Jane's company. Not Marcel, his bare chest that bursts faintly in the white lights, or even me, disheveled and relatively hideous.

Jane nodded. Gianna. She continued to a set of double doors at the back of the room, and we followed.

As Fredric walked past the office, he winked at Gianna, and she laughed.

On the other side of the wooden doors was another type of reception. The pale boy in a pearl grey suit could have been Jane's twin. His

hair was darker, and his lips weren't as full, all the same, and everything, he was just as beautiful. He showed up for us.

He smiled, reaching out.

Jane.

'Alec,' she replied, kissing the boy. They kissed their cheeks on both sides.

Then he looked at us.

'They send you for one and you come back with two... and a half,' he noted, looking at me.

'Good job.'

She laughed- the sound shone with joy like the rust of a baby.

'Welcome, Marcel,' said Alec. You look in a better mood.

'Marginally,' Marcel accepted in a flat voice. I looked at Marcel's hard face and wondered how his mood could have been darker before.

Alec laughed and examined me as I clung to Marcel's side. 'And that's the cause of all the trouble?' He asked, skeptical.

Marcel did not smile; contemptuous expression. Then he froze.

'Dibs,' Fredric called by chance from behind.

Marcel turned around, a building rumbling deep in his chest. Fredric smiled- his hand was raised, palm up; he wraps his fingers twice, inviting Marcel forward.

Olivia touched Marcel's arm.

'Patience,' she warns.

They exchanged a long look, and I wish I had heard what she was saying to him. I thought it had something to do with not attacking Fredric because Marcel took a deep breath and turned to Alec.

'Aron will be so happy to see you again,' Alec says as if nothing had happened.

'Let's not keep him waiting,' Jane suggested.

Marcel nodded once.

Alec and Jane, holding hands, paved the way for another large ornate hall- would there ever be an end?

They ignored the doors at the end of the hall doors, completely covered in gold, stopping halfway down the hallway and sliding a piece of

side paneling to expose a plain wooden door. It was not locked. Alec opened it for Jane.

I wanted to moan when Marcel pulled me to the other side of the door. It was the same old stone as the square, the alley, and the sewers. And it was still dark and cold.

Part: 4

Perfectly

The stone antechamber was not large. It quickly opened in a brighter and cavernous room, perfectly round like a huge castle turret... which was probably exactly what it was.

Two floors up, long window slits project thin rectangles of sunlight onto the stone floor

below. There were no artificial lights. The only furniture in the room were several massive wooden chairs, such as thrones, which were spaced unevenly, rinsing with curved stone walls. In the very center of the circle, in a slight depression, was another drain. I wondered if they were using it as an exit, like the hole in the street.

The room was not empty. A handful of people were summoned in a relaxed conversation.

The murmur of low, smooth voices was a gentle hum in the air. As I looked, a pair of pale women in summer gowns stopped in a patch of light, and, like prisms, their skin through the light in the rainbow shone against the walls of the sister.

The exquisite faces all turned to our party as we entered the room. Most of the immortals were dressed in discreet trousers and shirts that did not fit into the streets below at all. Yet the man who spoke first wore one of the long dresses. He was black and brushed against the floor. For a while, I thought his long black hair was the hood of his coat.

'Jane, my dear, you're back!' His voice was but a sweet sigh.

It drifted forward, and the movement flowed with such surreal grace that I gawked, my mouth hanging open. Even Olivia, whose every movement resembled dance, couldn't compare.

I was only more amazed as he floated closer and I could see his face. It wasn't like the

unusually attractive faces around him (for he wasn't approaching us alone; the whole group converged around him, some following, and some walking in front of him in the alert manner of the bodyguards.)

I couldn't decide if his face was beautiful or not. I guess the features were perfect. All the same and all, he was as different from the angels next to him as they were from me. His skin was translucent white, like onion skin, and he looked just as delicate- he stood in shocking contrast to the long black hair that framed his face. I felt a strange and horrible urge to touch her cheek, to see if it was softer than Marcel's or Olivia's, or if it was powdery, like chalk. His eyes were red, the same as the others around him, all

the same, and all, the color was darkened, the laity;
I wondered if his vision was affected by the mist.

He slipped towards Jane, took her face
in his papery hands, kissed her lightly on her full
lips, and then floated back with a step.

'Yes, Master. Jane smiled; the expression
made him look like an angelic child.' I brought him
back alive, just like you wanted him to.

'Ah, Jane.' He smiles, too.

'You are such a comfort to me.'

He turned his misty eyes towards us,
and the smile cleared- became ecstatic.

'And Olivia and Bell, too!'

'It's a nice surprise!'

'Wonderful!'

I had the look in shock as he called our names unofficially as if we were old friends falling for an unexpected visit.

He turned to our imposing escort.
'Fredric be a dear and talk to my brothers about our company. I'm sure they won't want to miss that.

'Yes, Master.' Fredric nodded and disappeared as we had come.

'See, Marcel?' The strange angel turned and smiled at Marcel like a tender All the same and everything, scolding Grandpa. 'What did I tell you? Aren't you glad you didn't give you what you wanted yesterday?'

'Yes, Aron, I am,' he accepted, clutching his arm around my waist.

'I love a happy ending.' Aron sighed.
'They are so rare. All the same and everything, I want the whole story. How did this happen? Olivia?' He turned to Olivia with curious and misty eyes.' Your brother seemed to think you infallible, all the same, and all that there was a mistake.

'Oh, I'm far from infallible. She flashed a dazzling smile. She looked perfectly at ease, except that her hands were hanging from small clenched fists.' As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.

'You are too modest,' Aron sickened. 'I've seen some of your most amazing feats, and I must admit I've never looked at anything like your talent. Wonderful!'

Olivia wobbled on Marcel.

Aron did not miss it.

'I'm sorry, we weren't presented correctly at all, were we?' It's just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother specially introduced us yesterday. You see, I share some of your brother's talent, but I'm limited in a way that he's not.

'And also, exponentially, more powerful,' added Marcel dryly. He looked at Olivia as he quickly explained. 'Aron needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, all the same, and everything he hears much more than I do. You know I only hear what's going through your head right now. Aron hears all the thoughts your mind has ever had.'

Olivia raised her delicate eyebrows, and Marcel bowed his head.

Aron didn't miss that either.

'All the same and everything, to be able to hear from afar... Aron sighed, gesticulating towards both, and the exchange that had just taken place.' It would be so convenient. Aron looked over our shoulders. All the other heads turned in the same direction, including Jane, Alec, and Eamettri, who stood silently beside us.

I was the slowest to turn. Fredric was back, and behind him were two other men dressed in black robes. Both looked a lot like Aron, we even had the same black hair running down. The other had a shock of snow-white hair- the same shade

as his face that grazed his shoulders. Their faces had identical and thin paper skin.

The trio of Joh's painting was complete, unchanged by the last three hundred years since it was painted. 'Marcus, Karly, look! Aron crooned.' Karly is alive after all, and Olivia is here with her! Isn't that wonderful?

Neither of the other two looked wonderful would be their first choice of words.

The black-haired man seemed completely annoyed by his snow-white hair covering half of his face, as he had seen too many millennia, of the enthusiasm of the Aron era.

Their lack of interest did not dampen Aron's pleasure.

Part: 5

Melodic

'Let's give history,' Aron almost sang in a feathery voice.

The old white-haired angel leaves, sliding towards one of the wooden thrones. The other stopped next to Aron, and he took out his hand, at first I thought I'd take Aron's hand. All the same and all, he just touched Aron's palm briefly, then dropped his hand at his side. Aron raised a black forehead. I was wondering how his papery skin didn't crumple into the effort.

Marcel sniffed very quietly, and Olivia looked at him, curious.

'Thank you, Marcus,' said Aron. It's very interesting.

I realized, a second late, that Marcus was making his thoughts known to Aron.

Marcus didn't seem interested. He moved away from Aron to join the one who must be Karly, sitting against the wall. Two of the angels present followed silently behind his bodyguards as I had thought before. I could see that the two women in sundown all the dresses had gone to stand alongside Karly in the same way. The idea of an angel in need of a guard was still a little ridiculous to me, and all of them, perhaps the elders were as fragile as their skin suggested.

Aron was shaking his head.
'Unbelievable,' he says. It's unbelievable.

Olivia's expression was frustrated. Marcel turned to her and explained himself again in a low and quick voice. Marcus sees relationships. He is surprised by the intensity of ours.

Aron smiled. 'So practical,' he repeated. Then he talked to us. 'It takes a little to surprise Marcus; I can assure you that.

I looked at Marcus' dead face, and I believed it.

'It's so hard to understand, even now,' said Aron,

looking at Marcel's arm wrapped around me. It was hard for me to follow Aron's chaotic train of thought. I had a hard time keeping up. 'How can you stay so close to her like that?

'It's not effortless,' marcel replied
calmly.

'All the same and all still killed his
chanteuse!

What a waste!

Marcel laughed once without humor.

'I look at it more like a price.'

'Aron was skeptical.' A very high price.

'Opportunity cost.'

Aron laughed. 'If I hadn't felt it
through your memories, I wouldn't have thought
that the call of someone's blood could be so strong.'

I've never felt anything like it myself. Most of us
would trade a lot for such a gift, and yet you...-

'Waste it,' concludes Marcel, his sarcastic voice now.

Aron laughs again. 'Ah, how I miss my friend Joh! You remind me of him, but he wasn't so angry.'

'Joh surpasses me in many other ways as well.'

'I certainly never thought of seeing Joh beaten for self-control of all things, all the same, and you're all ashamed of him.'

'Barely...' Marcel seemed impatient. As if he had had enough of foreplay. It scared me more; I couldn't help but imagine what he was waiting for.

'I'm happy with his success,' Aron mused. 'Your memories of him are quite a gift to me, but they amaze me exceedingly. I'm surprised by how

it is... I like his success in that unorthodox way he chose. I expected him to lose, weaken over time.'

I had mocked his plan to find other people who would share his particular vision. Yet, in a way, I am glad to be wrong.

Marcel did not answer me.

'All the same and all, your restraint!'

Aron sighed. 'I didn't know that such a force as possible. To ensure you against such a siren call, not just once and everything, over and over again, if I hadn't felt it myself, I wouldn't have believed it.'

Marcel looked at Aron's admiration without expression. I knew that his face pretty well in time hadn't changed that- to guess something bubbling beneath the surface. I fought

to keep my breath, even. 'I just remember how she appeals to you... Aron laughed. 'It makes me thirsty. Marcel tense.

'Don't be disturbed,' reassured Aron. 'I mean it doesn't hurt.' All the same and everything, I'm so curious, about one thing in particular. He looked at me with keen interest. 'Mary, I?' he asked impatiently, raising his hand.

'Ask him,' marcel suggested in a flat voice.

'Of course, how rude of me!' Aron exclaimed. 'Bell,' he addressed me directly now. 'I am fascinated that you are the only exception to Marcel's impressive talent- so very interesting that such a thing should happen! And I was wondering, since our talents are similar

in many ways if you would be so nice as to allow me to try to see if you are an exception to me, too?"

My eyes waved Marcel's face in terror. Despite Aron's politeness, I didn't think I had a choice. I was horrified at the thought of allowing him to touch me, but also paradoxically intrigued by the chance to feel his strange skin.

Marcel nodded encouragingly if because he was sure that Aron would not hurt me, or because there was no choice, I could not say.

I turned to Aron and raised my hand slowly in front of me. He was shaking.

He slipped closer, and I think he meant that his expression was reassuring. All the same and all, his papery features were too strange, too

foreign and scary, to reassure. The look on his face was more confident than his words had been.

Aron reached out, as if to shake my hand, and pressed his insignificant-looking skin against mine. It was hard all the same and all felt fragile shale rather than granite and even colder than I expected.

His filmed eyes smiled at mine, and it was impossible to look away. They were mesmerizing strangely and unpleasantly.

Aron's face changed as I watched. Confidence wavered and became doubtful at first, then incredulous before he calmed it down in a friendly mask.

'It's very interesting,' he said, freeing my hand and backing away.

My eyes wavered towards Marcel, and although his face was composed, I thought it seemed a little smug.

Aron continued to drift why a thoughtful expression. He was quiet for a while, his eyes flickering between the three of us.

Then, suddenly, he shook his head.
'A first,' he said to himself, 'I wonder if she is immune to our other talents.' Jane, my dear?
'No!' Marcel growled the word. Olivia grabs her arm with a restrained hand. He shook her.

Little Jane smiles happily at Aron.

'Yes, Master?'
Marcel was surly now, the heartbreaking and heartbreaking sound of him, glaring at Aron

with eyes full of bullets. The room was still gone, everyone looking at him in amazement as if he were committing an embarrassing social faux pas. I saw Fredric smile, I hope and take a step forward. Aron looked at him once, and he froze in place, his smile turning into a sulky expression.

Then he talked to Jane. 'I wondered, my dear if Karly is safe from you.'

I could hardly hear Aron on Marcel's furious growls. He let me down, moving to hide from their point of view. Karly ghostly in our direction, with his entourage, to watch.

Jane turned to us with a beatific smile. 'Don't do it!' Olivia cried while Marcel over-the-top of the little girl.

Before I could react, before anyone could jump between them, before Aron's bodyguards could get tense, Marcel was on the ground.

No one had touched him, all the same, and everything, he was on the stone floor writhing in obvious agony, while I watched in horror.

Jane was only smiling at her now, and everything clicked together.

What Olivia had said about great gifts, why everyone treated Jane with such deference, and why- Marcel had thrown himself in her way before she could do that to me.

Part: 6

Ringing

'Stop! I screamed, my voice echoing in the silence, jumping forward to put myself between them. Yet Olivia threw her arms around me in an unbreakable grip and ignored my struggles. There was no noise on Marcel's lips as he shouted against the stones. I felt like my head would explode because of the pain of looking at it.

'Jane,' Aron recalls in a calm voice. She looked up quickly, smiling again with pleasure, interrogative eyes. As soon as Jane looked away; Marcel was still.

Aron bowed his head towards me.

Jane turned her smile in my direction.

I didn't even see his look. I watched Marcel from Olivia's prison, still in unnecessary trouble.

'He's fine,' Olivia whispered in a tight voice. As she spoke, he sat down, then leaped slightly at his feet. His eyes met mine, and they were struck with horror. At first, I thought the horror was for what he had just suffered. All the same and all, then he quickly looked at Jane, and back to me and her face relaxed in relief.

I looked at Jane too, and she wasn't smiling anymore. She looked at me; his jaw clenched with the intensity of his concentration. I backed off, waiting for the pain.

Nothing happened.

Marcel was by my side. He touched Olivia's arm, and she gave me back to him.

Aron made fun of me. Hey. ha,' he said, laughing. 'It's wonderful!

Jane with frustration, leaning forward as if she were getting ready for spring.

'Don't be deported, my dear, Aron said in a comforting tone, placing a powdery hand on his shoulder.'

'It confuses us all.'

Jane's upper lip curled up on her teeth as she continued to dazzle over me.

« Ha, ha, ha, Aron chortled nouveau. 'You are very brave, Marcel, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do this to me once out of curiosity. He shook his head in admiration.'

Marcel looked disgusted.

'So what are we doing with you now?'

Aron sighed.

Marcel and Olivia stiffen up. That was the part they were waiting for. I started shaking.

'I don't suppose there's a chance that you've changed your mind?' Aron asked Marcel, I hope. 'Your talent would be a great addition to our small business.'

Marcel hesitated. From the corner of my eye, I saw Fredric and Jane wince.

Marcel seemed to weigh every word before he said it. 'I would be... rather... step. Aron asked, always hopeful. 'Perhaps you would be interested in joining us?'

'No, thank you,' says Olivia.

'What about you, Bell?' Aron raised his eyebrows.

Marcel hugs, in my ears. I looked at empty Aron. Was he joking? Or did he ask me if I wanted to stay for dinner?

It was Karly white-haired who broke the silence.

'What?' he demanded of Aron, and his voice, but no more than a whisper, was flat.

'Karly, you surely see the potential,' said Aron affectionately. 'I haven't seen such a promising potential talent since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us? Karly looked at him with a caustic

expression. Jane's eyes shone with indignation at the comparison.

Marcel smoked next to me. I heard a rumble in his chest, building towards a grunt. I couldn't let his temperament hurt him. 'No, thank you,' I said with a little more than a whisper, my voice breaking with dread.

Aron sighed. 'It's unfortunate. This mess.

Marcel has tightened up. 'Join or die, don't you? I suspected it when we were brought into this room. So much for your laws.

The tone of his voice surprised me. He looked furious, all the same, and all this, there was something deliberate in his delivery as if he had chosen his words with great care.

'Of course not.' We were already summoned here, Marcel, waiting for Heidi to return. Not for you.

'Aron,' said Karly. 'The law requires them. Marcel looked at Karly. 'How do you do it?' He must have known what Karly was thinking, however, and all he seemed determined to make him speak aloud.

Karly pointed the finger at me. 'She knows too much. You've laid out our secrets. His voice was papery thin, as was his skin.

'There are a few humans in your masquerade here too, Marcel reminded him, and I thought of the pretty receptionist below.'

Karly's face twisted into a new expression. Was that supposed to be a smile?

'Yes,' he agreed. 'All the same and everything, when they are no longer useful to us, they will be used to support us. This is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you ready to destroy her? I don't think so,' he laughs.

'I wouldn't,' I began, whispering again.

Karly silenced me with an icy look.

'You also have no intention of making her one of us,' continued Karly.

'Therefore, it is a vulnerability. Although it is true, for this, only his life is lost. You can leave if you want.'

Marcel broke his teeth.

'That's what I thought,' says Karly, 'with something akin to pleasure. Fredric thought forward, impatient.'

'Unless... Aron interrupted. He seemed dissatisfied with how the conversation had gone.'

'Unless you intend to give him immortality?'

Marcel sang his lips, hesitating for a moment before answering. 'What if I do?'

Aron smiled, happy again.

'Why?' Then you would be free to go home and give my greetings to my friend Joh.

'All the same and all, I'm afraid you'll have to say it.'

Aron raised his hand in front of him.

Karly, who had begun to scowl furiously, relaxed.

Marcel's lips tightened in a fierce line. He looked me in the eye, and I looked back.

'I think so,' he murmured.

Please.

Was that a disgusting idea? Would he rather die than change me? I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach.

Marcel looked at me with a tortured expression.

And then Olivia walked away from us, ahead towards Aron. We turned around to watch her. Her hand was raised like the sister.

She said nothing, and Aron waved her anxious guards as they moved to block her approach. Aron met her halfway and took her hand with an avid and acquisitive glow in her eyes.

He bent his head over their touching hands, his eyes closing as he concentrated.

Olivia was motionless, her face empty. I heard Marcel's teeth break together.

No one moved... Aron seems frozen on Olivia's hand. Seconds passed, and I became more and more stressed, wondering how long it would take before it was too long. Before that meant that something was not worse than it already was.

Another agonizing moment passed, and then Aron's voice broke the silence.

'Ha, ha, ha,' he said, laughing, his head still leaning forward. He looked up slowly, his eyes shining with excitement. 'It was fascinating!

Olivia smiles dryly. 'I'm glad you enjoyed it.

'To see things, you've seen especially those that haven't arrived yet!' He shook his head in wonder.

'All the same and all that it will do,' she reminded him, her voice calm.

'Yes, yes, it's pretty determined.' There is certainly no problem.

Karly looked bitterly disappointed- a feeling he seemed to share with Fredric and Jane.

'Aron,' Karly complained.

'Dear Karly,' smiled Aron. Do not worry. Think about the possibilities! They do not join us today, however, and we can all still hope for the future.

Imagine the joy of young people

Olivia alone would bring to our little house... Besides, I'm so curious to see how 'Karly turns out!' Aron seemed convinced. Didn't he realize how subjective Olivia's visions were? That she might decide to transform me today and change it tomorrow? A million small decisions, his decisions, and so many others, to Marcel- could change his path, and with that, the future.

And is it important that Olivia is ready, would it make a difference if I became an angel when the idea was so disgusting for Marcel? If death was, for him, a better alternative than having me in time, immortal boredom? Terrified as I was, I felt myself sinking into depression, drowning in it...

'So we're free to go now?' Marcel asked with one voice.

'Yes, yes,' said Aron pleasantly. All the same and all, please visit again. It was exciting!

'And we visit you too,' Karly said, her eyes suddenly half closed like the heavy gaze of a lizard. 'To make sure you follow through on your side.

Where, I, you, I wouldn't delay too long. We are not offering a second chance.

Marcel's jaw tightened tight, all the same, and all he nodded once.

Karly smiled and returned to the place where Mark was still sitting, impassive and indifferent. Fredric groans.

'Ah, Fredric.' Aron smiled, amused.

Heidi will be there at all times. patience.
Marcel's voice had a new advantage. 'In
that case, maybe we should leave as soon as
possible.

'Yes,' agreed Aron. 'It's a good idea.
Accidents happen. Please wait below until after
dark, however, if you don't mind.

'Of course,' agreed Marcel, moaning at
the thought of waiting for the day before our
escape.

'And here,' added Aron, adding so much to
Fredric with a finger. Fredric immediately
advances, and Aron detaches the gray coat worn
by the enormous angel, pulling from his shoulders.
He put it to Marcel. 'Take this.' You're a little
visible.

Marcel put on the long coat, leaving the hood down.

Aron sighed. 'It suits you.'

Marcel laughed, though, and everything broke abruptly, looking over his shoulder. Thank you, Aron. We'll wait below.

Part: 7

Ta-ta-ta

'Goodbye, young friends,' said Aron, his eyes shining, looking in the same direction. 'Let's go,' said Marcel, urgent now.

Eamettri gesture that we should follow, then define how we would have come, the only exit by the look of things.

Marcel quickly pulled me next to him.

Olivia was close to my other side, with a hard face.

'Not fast enough,' she murmured a little.

I looked at her, scared, all the same, and everything, she seemed only distressed. It was then that I heard for the first time the babbling of loud and rough voices coming from the antechamber.

'Well, that's unusual,' said the hoarse voice of a burgeoning man.

'Then, medieval,' an unpleasantly shrill female voice gushes back.

A large crowd walked through the small door, filling the smallest stone room. Eamettri asked us to make room. We pressed against the cold wall to let them pass.

The couple opposite, the Americans ringing with them, looked around them with eyes of appreciation.

'Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra! I could hear Aron singing the big turret.

The others, perhaps forty or more, fell after the couple. Some have studied the setting as tourists. Some photos even broke. Others looked confused as if the story that brought them into this room no longer made sense. I noticed a little dark woman in particular. around her neck was a rosary, and she grasped the cross firmly in one hand. She walked slower than the others, touching someone from time to time and asking a question in an unknown language.

No one seemed to understand her, and her voice became more panicked.

Marcel pulled my face against my chest, all the same, and all that was too late. I've already figured it out.

As soon as the smallest pause appeared, Marcel pushed me quickly towards the door. I could feel the horrified expression on my face, and the tears began to gather in my eyes.

The ornate gilded hallway was quiet, empty except for a beautiful sculptural woman.

She looked at us curiously, me in particular.

'Welcome home, Heidi,' welcomed her from behind us.

Heidi smiles in absentia. She reminded me of Rose, although they don't look alike- it was just

that her beauty, too, was exceptional, unforgettable. I couldn't look that far.

She was dressed to emphasize this beauty. His surprisingly long legs, darkened with tights, were exposed by the shortest miniskirts. Its top was long-sleeved and high-necked, all the same, and all that, extremely fitted and built of red vinyl. Her long mahogany hair was shiny, and her eyes were the strangest shade of purple- a color that could result from blue-tinted contacts on red irises.

'Eamettri,' she replied in a silky voice, her eyes flickering between my face and Marcel's grey coat.

'Beautiful peach,' Eamettri complimented, and I suddenly understood the eye-

catching outfit she was wearing... She was not only the fisherman all the same and all, but also the bait.

Part: 8

Exploded

Thank you. She flashed a beautiful smile.

'Don't you come?'

'In a minute.' Keep it to myself.

Heidi nodded and sneaked through the door with one last curious look at me.

Marcel gave me a rhythm that made me run to follow. Nevertheless, we still could not pass through the ornate door at the end of the corridor before the screams began.

VOL- EAMETTRI WE IN THE ZONE
OF RECEPTION JOYEUSEMENT OPULENCE,
where the Gianna woman was still at her post
behind the polite counter. Bright and harmless
music tinged with hidden speakers.
'Don't leave until nightfall,' he warned us.
Marcel nodded, and Eamettri rushed
away.
Gianna did not seem at all surprised by
the exchange, although she looked at Marcel's
borrowed mantle with astute speculation.
'Are you, okay?' Marcel asked under his
breath, too weak for the human woman to hear.
His voice was rough- though velvet may be rough-
with anxiety. Always stressed by our situation, I
imagined.

'You better have her sit down before she falls,' Olivia says. 'It's going to pieces.'

It was only then that I realized that I was shaking, shaking hard, that my whole frame was vibrating until my teeth were chatting and the room around me seemed to wobble and blur in my eyes. For a second, I wondered if this was how Marcel felt just before he exploded into a werewolf.

I heard a sound that didn't make sense, a strange, heartbreaking counterpart to the otherwise joyful background music. Distracted by the shaking, I couldn't tell where it came from.

'Sh-h, Bell, sh-h,' said Marcel, pulling me towards the sofa furthest from the curious man in the office.

'I think she's hysterical. Maybe you should slap her,' Olivia suggested.

Marcel looked at her frantically.

Then I understood. oh. The noise was me. The heartbreak noise was the sobs coming from my chest. That's what was shaking me.

'Everything is fine, you're safe, everything's fine,' he says over and over again. He pulled me on his lap and hid the thick wool coat around me, protecting me from his cold skin.

I knew it was stupid to react like that. Who knew how long I had to watch his race? He was saved, and I was saved, and he was able to leave me as soon as we were free. Having my eyes so full of tears that I couldn't see his features was a useless folly.

Nevertheless, behind my eyes where tears could not wash the picture, I could still see the panicked face of the little woman with the rosary.

'All these people,' he sobs.

'I know,' he murmured.

'It's so horrible.'

'Yes, it is. I wish you hadn't had to see that.'

I rested my head against his cold chest, using the thick coat to wipe my eyes. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down.

'Is there anything I can get you? It was Gianna, leaning over Marcel's shoulder with a look that was both concerned and yet still professional and detached at the same time. He

does not seem to bother her that her face was inches away from a hostile angel. She was either totally unconscious or very good at her job.'

'No,' replied Marcel coldly.

She nodded, smiled at me, and then disappeared.

I waited until he was out of range.

'Does she know what's going on here? I demanded, my voice low and hoarse. I was controlling myself, my breathing night.

'Yes, she knows everything,' said Marcel. 'Does she know they're ever going to kill her? 'She knows it's a possibility,' he says.

It surprised me.

Marcel's face was hard to read. She hopes they will decide to keep her.

I felt the blood leave my face.

'She wants to be one of them?'

He nodded once, his eyes fixed on my face, looking at my reaction.

I shivered. 'How can she want that?' I whispered, more to myself than really looking for an answer. 'How can she watch these people fall through this hideous room and want to be a part of that? Marcel, did not respond. His expression twisted in response to something I had said.'

Looking at his two beautiful faces, trying to understand the change, he suddenly struck me that I was here, in Marcel's arms, however fleeting it may be, and that we were not at that very moment about to be killed.

'Oh, Marcel, I cried, and I sobbed again. It was a stupid reaction. The tears were too thick for me to return to his face, and it was inexcusable. I only had until sunset, that's for sure. Like a fairy tale again, with delays that put an end to the magic.'

'What's wrong?' He asked, still anxious, rubbing my back with gentle pats.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. What was the worst he could do? Push me and hug me closer to him. 'Is it sick for me to be happy right now?' I asked. My voice broke twice.

He didn't push me. He squeezed me against his icy chest, so tight that it was difficult to breathe, even with my lungs firmly intact. 'I know exactly what you mean,' he murmured. 'All

the same and all, we have a lot of reasons to be happy. On the one hand, we're alive.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'It's a good one.
'And together,' he breathed. His breath was so soft that he made my head swim.

I nodded, of course, he didn't put the same weight on that consideration as I did.

'And I hope we'll still be alive tomorrow.' I hope, I say uncomfortable.
'The outlook is pretty good,' Olivia assured me. She had been so calm; I almost forgot he was here.

'I'm going to see Ray in less than twenty-four hours,' she says in a satisfied tone.
Olivia Lucky. She could trust her future.

I couldn't keep my eyes open on Marcel's face for long. I looked at him, wishing more than anything that the future would never come. That this moment would last forever, or, if it were not, that I would cease to exist when it did.

Marcel looked me straight in the eye, his eyes soft black, and it was easy to pretend that he felt the same way. That is what I did. I semblant.de to make the moment sweeter.

His fingers traced the circles before my eyes. 'You look so tired.

'And you're thirsty,' he murmured, studying the purple bruises under his black irises.

He shrugged. 'It's nothing.'

'Are you sure?' I could sit down with Olivia, I said, unwilling; I'd rather kill myself now than move an inch from where I was.

'Don't be ridiculous.' He sighed; his gentle breath caressed my face. 'I've never been in better control of this side of my nature than I have now.'

I had a million questions for him. One of them is bubbling on my lips now, all the same, and everything, I held my tongue. I didn't want to spoil the moment, however imperfect, here in this room that made me sick, under the eyes of the monster.

Here, in his arms, it was so easy to fantasize that he wanted me. I didn't want to think about his motives now to find out if he

acted that way to keep me calm while we were still in danger, or if he felt guilty about where we were and relieved that he wasn't responsible for my death. Maybe the interval time had been enough for me not to disturb him at the moment. All the same and all that, it didn't matter. I was so much happier pretending.

I was silent in his arms, I recorded his face, I pretended...

He looked at my face as if he were doing the same thing, while he and Olivia discussed how to get home.

Their voices were so fast and low that I knew Gianna couldn't understand. I missed half of it myself. However, it seemed that there would

be more flights. I was wondering if the yellow Porsche had gone back to its owner.

'What is everything about singers?' Olivia asked at one point. 'La Tua Cantante,' says Marcel. His voice turned words into music.

'Yes, that,' said Olivia, 'and I concentrated for a moment.' I had questioned that, too, at the time.

I felt Marcel shrug his shoulders around me. 'They have a name for someone who feels the way

Karly does it to me. She is called my singer because her blood sings for me.

Olivia...

I was tired enough to sleep, however, and all, I fought against weariness. I wasn't going to miss a second of the time I spent with him. Every once in a while, talking to Olivia, he would suddenly lean over and kiss me- his smooth glass lips brushing against my hair, my forehead, the tip of my nose. Each time it was like an electric shock to my long sleepy heart. The sound of his blows seemed to fill the whole room.

It was the slap of heaven in the middle of hell.

I've completely lost track of time. So when Marcel's arms clenched around me, and he and Olivia looked at the back of the room with suspicious eyes, I panicked. I cringe into Marcel's chest as Alec-his eyes now a bright ruby, all the

same, and all, still immaculate in his light gray suit, despite the afternoon meal walking through the double doors.

That was good news.

'You're free to leave now,' Alec told us, his tone so warm that you'd think we were all friends for a lifetime. 'We ask you not to linger in the city.

Marcel did not respond to the present; his voice was icy.

'It won't be a problem.

Alec smiled, nodded, and disappeared again.

'Follow the right lane around the corner until the first set of elevators,' Gianna told us as Marcel helped me get up. 'The lobby is two stories

down and off the street. Goodbye, now,' she added pleasantly. I was wondering if her skills would be enough to save her.

Olivia shot him with a dark look.

I was relieved that there was another exit; I didn't know if I could handle another tour through the subway.

We left by a luxurious lobby with taste. I was the only one looking back at the medieval castle that housed the elaborate business façade. I couldn't see the turret from here, which I was grateful for.

The party was still boozing in the streets. The streetlights were just coming on as we walked quickly through the narrow, cobbled streets. The sky was dull gray, discoloration above,

all the same, and all the buildings piled up in the streets so tightly that it felt darker.

The party was darker, too.

Marcel's long coat does not dingle as he could have done on a normal evening in Volterra.

There were others in black satin coats now, and the plastic fangs I had seen on the child in the square today seemed to be very popular with adults. 'Ridiculous,' Marcel whispered once.

I didn't notice when Olivia disappeared next to me. I tried to ask her a question, and she was gone.

'Where's Olivia? I whispered in panic.

She went to get your luggage from where she hid it this morning.

I had forgotten that I had access to a toothbrush. It has greatly brightened my outlook.

'She's stealing a car, too, isn't she? I guessed it.

He smiles. Not until we're out.

It looked like a very long way to the entrance. Marcel could see that I had passed; he injured his arm around my waist and supported most of my weight as we walked.

I shuddered as he pulled me through the dark stone archway. The huge ancient portcullis above was like a cage door, threatening to fall on us, to lock ourselves in.

Part: 9

Detective

He drove me to a dark car, waiting in a shadow pool to the right of the door with the engine running. To my surprise, he slipped in the back seat with me, instead of insisting on driving.

Olivia apologized. 'I'm sorry. She gestured vaguely towards the dashboard.

'There wasn't much to choose from.
'That's fine,

Olivia. He smiles. 'Not all of them can be 911 Turbos. She sighed. 'I might have to acquire one of these legally. It was fabulous.

'I'm going to get you one for Christmas,' Marcel promised.

Olivia turned to him, which worried me, for she was already accelerating down the dark, winding hill at the same time.

'Yellow,' she told him.

Marcel kept me in his embrace. Inside the grey coat, I was warm and comfortable. More than comfortable.

'You can sleep now, Bell,' he murmured.

It's over.

I knew he meant danger, the nightmare in the old town, all the same, and all that, I had to swallow hard again before I could answer.

'I don't want to sleep. I'm not tired.

Just the second part was a lie. I was not about to close my eyes. The car was only dimly lit by the

dashboard controls, all the same, and all I had to do was see his face.

He squeezed his hollow lips under my ear.
'Try,' he encouraged.

I shook my head.

He sighed. 'You're always so stubborn.
I was stubborn; I fought with my heavy lids, and I won.

The dark road was the hardest part;
the bright lights of Florence airport made things easier, as did the chance to brush my teeth and change into clean clothes; Olivia bought Marcel new clothes, too, and he left the dark coat on a pile of garbage in an alley.

The plane trip to Rome was so short that there was no chance for fatigue to drag me

under. I knew that flying from Rome to Atlanta would be another matter entirely, so I asked the air hostess if she could bring me a Coke.

'Bell,' said Marcel of disapproval. He knew my low tolerance to caffeine.

Olivia was behind us. I could hear him whispering to Ray on the phone.

'I don't want to sleep,' I reminded him. I gave him a credible excuse because it was true. 'If I close my eyes now, I'm going to see things I don't want to see. I'm going to have nightmares.'

He didn't argue with me after that. It would have been a very good time to talk, to get the answers- I needed- all the same and everything, not wanted; I was already desperate for what I could hear. We had an

uninterrupted block of tires in front of us, and he couldn't escape me into a well plane, not easily, at least. No one would hear us except Olivia; it was late, and most passengers turned off the lights and asked for pillows with deaf voices. The conversation would help me fight exhaustion.

All the same and all, paradoxically, I bit my tongue against the flood of questions. My reasoning was probably tainted by exhaustion, all the same, and all, I hoped that by postponing the discussion, I could buy a few more hours with him a few moments later in this for another night, Scheherazade style.

Part: 10

Self-entertainment

My sis upskirt and masturbate video and pic are all about me.

So I continued to drink soda and even resist the urge to blink. Marcel seemed perfectly happy to hold me in his arms, his fingers tracing my face over and over again. I touched his face too. I couldn't stop, even though I was afraid it would hurt me later when I was alone again. He continued to kiss my hair, my forehead, my wrists... All the same and everything, never my lips, and it was good. After all, how many ways can a heart be mutilated, and can it still be expected to continue beating? I had been through a lot of things that

should have ended me in the last few days, though, and it didn't make me feel strong.

Instead, I felt fragile, as a word could break me.

Marcel didn't speak. Maybe he was hoping I'd sleep.

Maybe he had nothing to say.

I won the fight against my heavy lids.

I was awake when we arrived at the Indiana airport, and I even watched the sun start to rise on the Alleghenies cloud cover before marcel slid through the closed window. I was proud of myself. I hadn't missed a minute.

Neither Olivia nor Marcel were surprised by the reception waiting for us at Sea-Tac airport, all the same, and it all caught me off guard. Ray

was the first I saw; he didn't seem to see me at all. Her eyes were only for Olivia. She quickly went to her side; they did not kiss like other couples who met there. They only looked at each other, but somehow the moment was so firm that I still felt the need to lift the air.

Joh and Isla waited in a quiet corner away from the line for metal detectors, in the shadow of a large pillar. Isla reached me, hugging me fiercely, but clumsily because Marcel kept his arms around me too.

'Thank you very much,' she said to my ear.

Then she threw her arms around Marcel, and she seemed to cry if possible.

'You'll never make me go through this again,' she almost growled.

Marcel smiled, repented.

Sorry, Mommy.

'Thank you, Bell,' said Joh. We owe you.

'No sooner did I mumble. The sleepless night was suddenly overwhelming. My head felt disconnected from my body.

'She died standing,' Marcel scolds. 'Let's take her home.

I do not know if the house was what I wanted at this point, I fell, half blind, through the airport, Marcel dragging me to one side and Isla on the other. I didn't know if Olivia and Ray were behind us or not, and I was too exhausted to watch.

I think I slept most of the time, even though I was still walking when we reached their car. The surprise of seeing Emmah and Rose leaning against the black sedan under the dim lights of the car park gave me a new lease of life. Marcel stiffens.

'Don't do that,' whispered Isla. 'She feels terrible.

'She shouldn't try,' Marcel says, 'to lower her voice.

'It is not his fault,' I said, 'my words are full of exhaustion.'

'Let him change,' begged Isla. We'll ride with Olivia and Ray. Marcel shines brightly on the blond angel of absurd beauty that awaits us.

'Please, Marcel,' I said. I did not want to ride with Rose, nor did it seem, however, and all this, I had caused more than enough discord in his family.

He sighed and pushed me back to the car.

Emmah and Ross got in the front seat without talking, while Marcel shot me again in the back. I knew I was no longer going to be able to fight my eyelids, and I put my head against his chest in defeat, letting them close. I felt the car purring at life.

'Marcel,' Ross began.
'I know. Marcel's sudden tone was not generous.'

'Liv? Ross asked softly.'

My eyelids floated in shock and excitement. It was the first time she spoke to me directly.

'Yes, Rose?' I asked, hesitant.

'I'm incredibly sorry, Liv. I feel unhappy for every part of it and so grateful that you dared to go and save my brother after what I did. Please say you're going to exonerate me.'

The words were clumsy and strange, stilted for the reasons that his embarrassment, all the same, and everything, they seemed sincere.

'Of course, Ross,' I stammered, seizing at any chance of making her hate me a little less. It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who jumped off the cliff. Of course, I forgive you.'

The words came out like porridge.

'It doesn't matter until she's conscious, Rose,' Emmah says with a laugh.

'I am conscious,' I said. It sounded like a scrambled sigh.

'Let her sleep,' insisted Marcel, 'all the same, and everyone, her voice was a little warmer.

Marcel set me up. I could recognize that I was straight, all the same, and everything, I could not feel my legs. I walked forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled towards my face.

Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the pavement.

And then I heard Jack.

« Bell! »

'Jack, I mumbled, trying to shake the stupor.

'Sh-h,' whispered Marcel. 'It's good; you are at home and safe. All you have to do is sleep.

'I can't believe you have the courage to show your face here. Jack rang Marcel; his voice much closer now.

'Stop, Dad,' I moaned. He did not hear me.

'What's wrong with her? Jack demanded.
'She's just very tired, Jack, Marcel assures her quietly.

'Please let her rest.

'Don't tell me what to do! Jack screamed.
'Give it to me. Get your hands out of her!

Marcel tried to pass me to Jack, all the same, and all that, I clung to him with locked,

tenacious fingers. I could feel my father pulling me on the arm.

'Stop, Dad,' I said, with more volume. I managed to drag my eyelids to look at Jack with bleary eyes. 'Be angry with me.

We were in front of my house. The front door was open. The above cloud cover was too thick to be guessed at one o'clock in the day.

'You bet I will be,' Jack promised. Go. Kay. Let me down, I sighed.

Marcel set me up. I could see that I was straight, all the same, and all that, I could not feel my legs. I walked forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled towards my face. Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the concrete.

'Let me lift it,' said Marcel. Then I'm going to leave.

'No,' they cried in panic. I didn't have my answers yet. He must have stayed at least that long, didn't he?

'I won't be far away,' marcel promised, whispering so low in my ear that Jack had no hope of hearing.

I didn't hear Jack answer, all the same, and all, Marcel entered the house. My open eyes only went up the stairs. The last thing I felt was that Marcel's fresh hands detached his fingers from his shirt.

-TRUTH-

I HAD THE IMPRESSION I had slept for a very long time- my body was stiff as I

hadn't moved once through all this time, either.

My brain was baffled and slow; strange, colorful dreams and nightmares swirled dizzily encompassing the inside of my head.

They were so accurate. The terrible and the heavenly, all mixed up in a weird mess. There was a strong impatience and fear, both part of this frustrating fantasy where your feet can't move fast enough... And there were plenty of dragons, red-eyed demons who were all the most horrible for their hollow civility.

The dream was still strong- I could even remember the names.

All the same and all, the strongest and clearest part of the dream was not horror. It was the angel that was clearest.

It was hard to let him go and wake up.

This vision did not want to be pushed into the vault of the images that I refused to stay. I struggled with it as my mind became more alert, focusing on reality. I didn't remember what day of the week it was, though, and everything, I was sure that Marcel or school or work or something was waiting for me. I breathed deeply, wondering how to cope with another day.

Something cold hit my forehead with the softest pressure.

I pressed my eyes more closed. I was still dreaming, it seemed, and it felt exceptionally real. I was so close to waking up... one second to the next now, and it would have disappeared. Still, I recognized that it was too real, too real to be

good for me. The stone arms I imagined wrapped in myself were far too abundant. If I let go of it go further, I would be melancholy to her later. With a resigned sigh, I tore off my eyelids to dispel the illusion.

'Oh! I gasped and threw my fists at my eyes.

Well, I had gone too far; It must have been a mistake to let my imagination get out of control.

Okay, so 'leave' was the wrong word. I had forced him out of my hand pretty much followed my hallucinations- and now my mind had broken.

It took me less than half a second to realize that, as long as I was crazy now, I might as well enjoy the illusions when they were nice.

I opened my eyes and Marcel was still there, his perfect face a few inches from mine.

Part: 11

Terrify

'Did I threaten you? His low voice was troubled. It was very good because the misconceptions were going. The face, the call, the smell, it was so much better than drowning. The magnificent invention of my creativity looked at my changing expressions, with concern. His irises were black, with shades of blue with bruises under them.

He surprised me; in my hallucinatory,
they were generally better fed.

I blinked twice, desperately trying to
remember the last thing I was sure was real.
Olivia was part of my dream, and I was wondering
if she had come back at all, or if it was just the
preamble. I thought she came back the day I
almost drowned...

Oh, I snapped. My throat was thick
when I was sleeping. 'What's wrong, we asked
him?

I disapproved, unfortunately. His face
was even more anxious than before.

'I'm dead, right? I moaned. 'I don't
drown. Damn, shit! It's going to kill Jack.

Marcel frowned, too. 'You're not dead.

'So why don't I wake up? I defied,
raising my eyebrows.

'Are you awake?
I shook my head. 'Of course, of course.
That's what you want me to think. And
then it'll be worse when I wake up. If I wake up,
which I don't want because I'm dead.

It's awful. Poor Jack. And Ayanna and
Maggie... I followed with horror what I had done.
'I can see where you might confuse me
with a nightmare. His short smile was dark. 'All
the same and all, I can't imagine what you could
have done to end up in hell.

Did you commit a lot of murders while I
was away? I grimaced. 'No, no, no, if I were in hell,
you wouldn't be with me.

He sighed.

My head was getting clearer. My eyes wavered away from his face against his will, for a second, towards the dark and open window, and then towards him. I started to remember the details... and I felt a weak and unknown blush warms the skin on my cheekbones as I slowly realized that Marcel was here with me, and I was wasting time being an idiot.

'Did all this happen, then? It was almost impossible to reallocate my dream to reality. I couldn't wrap my head around the concept. 'It depends.' Marcel's smile was still difficult. 'If you're talking about us almost being shot in Italy, then, yes.

'How strange,' I mused. 'I went to Italy. Is that

I had never been more east than Albuquerque?

He rolled his eyes. 'Maybe you should go back to sleep. You are not consistent.'

'I'm not tired anymore. Everything was fine now. 'What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?

'It's just after one o'clock in the morning. So for about fourteen hours.'

I stretched out while he was talking. I was so stiff.

'Jack? I asked.
Marcel frowned: 'Sleep... you should probably know that I'm breaking the rules right

now. Well, not technically, since he said, I should never walk through his door again, and I went out the window...

All the same and everything, again, the intention was clear.

'Jack banished you from the house? I asked, disbelief quickly blended into fury.

His eyes were sad. 'Did you expect anything else?

My eyes were crazy. I was going to have a few words with my father- maybe it would be a good time to remind him that I was over the legal age of adulthood. It didn't matter, of course, except in principle. Too soon, there would be no reason for the ban. I turned my thoughts to less painful avenues.

'What's the story? I asked, really curious, all the same, and all, as desperately trying to keep the conversation casual, to keep a firm grip on myself, so that I wouldn't scare him with the frantic, gnawing craving that was raging in me.

'What do you mean by that?
'What do I say to Jack? What is my excuse to disappear for... How long have I been gone? I tried to count the hours in my head.

Only three days. His eyes tightened, all the same, and all, he smiled more naturally this time.

'In fact, I was hoping you could have a good explanation.

I have nothing.

I moaned. It's fabulous.

'Well, maybe Olivia will find something,' he offered, trying to comfort me.

And I was comforted. Who cared what I had to deal with later? Every second he was here so close, his flawless face glowing in the dim light of the numbers on my alarm clock was precious and not wasted.

Part: 12

Undying Faith

'So,' I started, choosing the least important question, but still of vital importance, to begin with. I was delivered safely to the house, and he might decide to leave at any time. I had to

get him to talk. Moreover, this temporary sky was not entirely complete without the sound of his voice. 'What did you do, until three days ago?

His face was engaged in an instant.

'Nothing exciting.

'Of course not,' I mumbled.

'Why do you make this face?

'Well... I put my lips in the bag, I saw.

'If you were, after all, just a dream, that's exactly the kind of thing you said. My imagination must be used.

He sighed. 'If I tell you, will you finally believe that you are not having a nightmare?

'Nightmare! I rehearsed with contempt.

He waited for my answer. 'Perhaps,' I said after a second of reflection. If you tell me.

'I was... hunting.

'Is this the best you can do? I've been
criticizing.

'It doesn't prove that I'm awake.

He falters, then preaches slowly,
choosing his words carefully. 'I wasn't hunting
food for the feet... I was trying my hand to...
tracking. I am not very qualified for that.

'What were you following? I asked,
intrigued.

'It's nothing to do with that. His words
did not correspond to his expression; he looked
upset, uncomfortable.

'I don't understand.

He hesitated; his face, shining with a
strange green plaster of the light of the clock,
was torn.

He took a deep breath. 'I owe you an
apology. No, of course, I owe you a lot, much more
than that. All the same and everything, you must
know, 'the words started to flow so fast, the way
I remembered that he sometimes spoke when he
was restless, that I had to concentrate to catch
them all. That I had no idea.

I didn't know the mess I was leaving
behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So,
safe. I had no idea that Jenna, her lips curled up
when he said the name, would return. I confess
when I saw her that I had already paid much
more attention to James' thoughts. Still, I didn't

see that she had that kind of answer in her. That she even had such a connection with him. I think I realize why now she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never came to her heart. It was his overconfidence that clouded his feelings about him that prevented me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

'Not that there is an excuse for what I let you face. When I heard what you said to Olivia- what she saw herself- when I realized that you were going to put your life in the hands of werewolves, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there apart from Jenna herself- he shuddered, and the gushing of words stopped for a short second. 'Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my heart, even now, when

I can see you and feel safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for... Stop it.

I interrupted him. He looked at me with anguished eyes, and I tried to find the right words, the words that would free him from that imaginary obligation that was causing him so much pain. These are very difficult words to say. I didn't know if I could get them out without breaking down. All the same and everything, I had to try to get it right. I didn't want to be a source of guilt and anguish in his life. He should be happy, no matter what it costs me.

I was hoping to postpone this part of our last conversation. It was going to put an end to things much sooner.

By relying on all my months of training
trying to be normal for Jack, I kept my face
smooth. 'Marcel,' I said. His name burned my
throat a little at the exit. I felt the ghost of the
hole, waiting to tear again as soon as it
disappeared. I didn't quite see how I was going to
survive this time. 'It has to stop now. You can't
think of it that way. You can't let that... guilt...
rule over your life. You can't take responsibility for
what's happening to me here. None of this is your
fault, it's just part of how life is for me. So if I'm
traveling in front of a bus or anything next time,
you have to realize that it's not your job to take
the blame.

You can't go to Italy because you feel
bad for not saving me. Even if I had jumped off

that cliff to die, it would have been my choice, not your fault. I know it's up to you... your nature takes the blame for everything, all the same, and everything, you really can't let that make you go to such extremes! This is a very irresponsible thing on the part of Isla and Joh and...

I was about to lose him. I stopped to breathe deeply, hoping to calm down. I had to free him. I had to make sure it didn't happen again.

'It's a Karly,' he murmured, 'the strangest expression that crosses his face.' He almost looked crazy. 'Do you think I asked the department to kill me because I felt guilty?

I felt the empty misunderstanding on my face.

'Isn't it?

'Do you feel guilty? Intensely, then.

More than you can understand.

'So... What are you saying? I don't understand.

'Bell, I went to the ministry because I thought you were dead,' said he, his voice soft, his eyes fierce. Even if I had not had my hand in your death,' he shuddered, whispering the last word, even if it was not my fault, I would have gone to Italy. I should have been more careful, I should have spoken directly to Olivia, rather than accepting Rose's opportunity. All the same and all the things I had to think about when the boy said Jack was at the funeral? What are the odds?

'The odds... he murmured then, distracted. Her voice was so low that I wasn't

sure I heard it correctly. 'The odds are always stacked against us. Error after error.

I'll never criticize Romeo again.

'All the same and everything, I still don't understand,' I said.

'That's all I mean. What are you doing?

'Excuse me?

'What if I were dead?

He looked at me dubiously for a long time before answering. 'Do you remember anything I told you before?

'I remember everything you told me.

Including words that had denied everything else.

He stroked the tip of his fresh finger against my lower lip. 'Bell, you seem to be under a misconception. He sealed his eyes, shaking his head

back and forth with a half-smile on his gorgeous face.

It was not a happy smile. 'I thought I had explained it before. Bell, I can't live in a world where you don't exist.

'I am... My head was swimming while I was looking for the right word. 'Confused.' It worked. I didn't understand what he was saying.

He looked deeply into my eyes with his sincere and earnest look. 'I'm a good liar, Bell, I have to be.

I stopped, my flesh locked like the collision. The fault line in my wavy chest; the effort of it took my wind away.

He shook my shoulder, trying to loosen my rigid pose. 'Let me finish! I'm a good liar,

though, and everything, again, so you'll believe me so fast. He won. 'It was... atrocious. I waited, always frozen.

'When we were in the forest when I said goodbye

I didn't allow myself to remember that. I fought to keep myself in the current second only.

'You were not going to let go,' he murmured. 'I could see that. I didn't want to do it, I felt like it would kill me to do it anyway and all that, I knew that if I couldn't convince you that I didn't love you anymore, it would take you so long to go on with your life. I was hoping that if you thought I had moved on, so would you.

'A clean break,' I murmured through impassive lips.

'Exactly. All the same and all, I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be almost impossible for you to be so sure of the truth that I could stay between my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head.

I lied, and I'm sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from who I am. I lied to save you, and it didn't work. Excuse me.

'All the same and all, how could you believe me? After a thousand times, I told you that I loved you, how could you let a word break your faith in me?

I did not respond. I was too shocked to form a rational answer.

'I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly thought I didn't want you anymore. The most absurd concept, ridiculous, as if there were none so that I could exist without needing you!'

I was still frozen... His words were incomprehensible because they were impossible.

He shook my shoulder again, not hard, all the same, and all that, enough for my teeth to tremble a little. 'Bell,' he sighed. 'Really, what do you think!'

So I started crying. Tears gushed out and gushed miserably down my cheeks.

'I knew it,' he sobbed. 'I knew I was dreaming.'

'You are impossible,' said he, 'and he laughed once a hard and frustrated laugh. How

can I put this on so you can believe me? You don't sleep, and you're not dead. I'm here, and I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. I thought of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second I was away. When I told you I didn't want you, it was the darkest blasphemy.

I shook my head as tears continued to ooze from the corners of my eyes.

'You don't believe me, do you?' 'Why can you believe the lie, all the same, and everything, not the truth?

'It never made sense for you to love me,' I explained, his voice breaking twice. I've always known that.

His eyes were narrowing; his jaw clenched.

'I will prove that you are awake,' he promised.

He grabbed my face firmly in his iron hands, ignoring my struggles when I tried to turn my head.

'Please don't do it,' he murmured.

He stopped his lips just half an inch from mine.

'Why not?' His breath blew in my face, swirling my head.

'When I wake up'- He opened his mouth to protest, so I revised- 'Okay, forget that when you leave again, it's going to be pretty hard without it too.

He recoiled an inch, to look me in the face.

'Yesterday, when I touched you, you
were so... hesitant, so cautious, and yet always the
same. I need to know why. Is it because I'm too
late? Because I hurt you too much? Because, you
moved on, like I wanted for you, too? That would
be... Quite right.

I'm not going to challenge your decision.
So don't try to spare my feelings, tell me now if you
can still love me, after all, I've done to you. And?

'What kind of stupid question is that?
'You just have to answer. Please
I watched it darkly for a long time. 'The
way I feel for you will never change. Of course, I
love you and there is nothing you can do about it!

'That's all I needed to hear.

His mouth was on mine at the time, and I couldn't fight him. Not because he was a thousand times stronger than me, all the same, and all because my will collapsed to dust off the second our lips met. This kiss was not as careful as others I remembered, which suited me very well. If I wanted to get the best out of the business as possible.

So I kissed him back, my heart pounding a jagged and disjointed rhythm while my breath turned to the pants and my fingers moved impatiently on his face. I felt his marble body against all my lines, and I was so glad he didn't listen to me. No pain in the world would have justified missing this. His hands memorized my face, in the same way, that mine traced his, and in

the brief seconds when his lips were free, he whispered my name.

When I started to feel dizzy, he left, to put his ear against my heart.

I fanned, dazed, waiting for my gasping to slow down and calm down.

'By the way,' he said casually.

'I'm not going to leave you.'

I didn't say anything, and he seemed to hear the skepticism in my silence.

He raised his face to lock my gaze into his. 'I'm not going anywhere. Not without you,' he added more seriously.

'I only left you in the first place because I wanted you to have a chance of a normal, happy, human life. I could see what I was doing to you,

keep you constantly on the brink of danger, move away from the world you belonged to, risk your life every time I was with you.

I had to try. I had to do something, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn't thought you'd be better off, I would never have been able to leave. I'm way too selfish.

You alone could be more important than what I wanted... what I needed. What I want, and what I need, is to be with you, and I know I will never be strong enough to leave again. I have too many excuses to stay. Thank God for that! It seems that you cannot be safe, no matter how many kilometers I put between us.

'Don't promise me anything,' he murmured. If I let myself hope, and it came to

nothing... that would kill me. Where all these ruthless angels had not been able to finish me off, hope would do the job.

The anger glinted metallic into his black eyes.

'You think I'm lying to you now?
'No- don't lie... I shook my head, trying to think about it coherently. Examine the assumption that he loves me while remaining objective, clinical so that I do not fall into the trap of hope. 'You could say it... Right away. And tomorrow, when you think about all the reasons you left? Or next month, when Ray gives me trusting ed?

He flinches...

I thought about the last days of my life before he left me, I tried to see them through the filter of what he was telling me now. From this point of view, imagining that he had left me while loving me, left me for me, his smoking and cold silences took on a different meaning. 'It's not like you didn't think about the first decision though, is it? I guessed it. 'You'll end up doing what you think is right.

'I'm not as strong as you give me credit for,' he says. Good and evil have ceased to mean a great deal to me; I'll be back anyway. Before Rose told me the news, I had already spent trying to live one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to spend an hour. It was only a matter of time, and not much before, I showed up at your

window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now if you want that.

I grimaced... 'Be serious, please.

'Oh, I am, he insisted, blatant now.' Could you try to hear what I am saying? You let me try to explain what you mean to me?

He waited, studying my face as he spoke to make sure I listened.

'Before you, my daughter, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, All the same, and all, there were stars-points of light and reason...

And then you shot at my sky like a meteor.

Suddenly, everything was on fire; there was brilliance, there was a beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen on the horizon, everything went black.

Nothing had changed, however, and all my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn't see the stars. And there was no reason for anything.

I wanted to believe it. All the same and everything, it is my life without him that he described, not the other way around.

'Your eyes will adjust,' I mumbled.
'That's just the problem- they can't.
'What about your distractions?
He laughed without any trace of humor.
'Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from... agony. My heart hasn't beat for nearly ninety years, however, and everything was different. It was as if my heart had disappeared as if I were hollow.

As if I had left everything in me here
with you.

'It's funny,' he whispered.

He had a perfect eyebrow.

'Is it funny?

'I meant strange, I thought it was
just me. A lot of pieces of me are gone too. I
haven't been able to breathe for so long. I filled
my lungs, luxuriating in sensation. 'And my heart.
It was lost.

He closed his eyes and put his ear back
on my heart. I left my cheek pressed against her
hair, felt the texture of it on my skin, felt the
delicious scent of it.

'The follow-up was not a distraction
then? I asked, curious, and also needed to distract

me. I was in great danger of hoping. I couldn't stop for long. My heart was beating, singing in my chest.

'No,' he sighed. This has never been a distraction. It was an obligation.

'What does that mean?

'It means that even though I didn't expect Jenna to be in danger, I wasn't going to let her get away with... As I said, I was horrible. I traced it to Texas, anyway, and everything, and then I followed a false trail to Brazil and it came here. He's moaning.'

'I wasn't even on the right continent! And all the time, worse than my worst fears...'

'You were hunting with Jenna? I screamed half as soon as I could find my voice, pulling through two octaves.

Jack's distant snoring stuttered, then tightened a steady rhythm.

'Not well,' replied Marcel, studying my outraged expression with a confused look. All the same and everything, I'm going to do better this time. It does not stain the air perfectly by breathing and outdoors for much longer.

'It's... out of the question, I managed to suffocate. madness. Even if he had Emmah or Ray to help him. Even if he had Emmah and Ray to help him. It was worse than my other imaginations: Marcel Black standing through a small space of Jenna's vicious and feline figure. I

couldn't bear to imagine Marcel there, even though he was so much more durable than my half-human best friend.

'It's too late for her. I may have let go the other time, all the same, and everything, not now, not after

I interrupted him again, trying to sound calm. 'Didn't you just promise you wouldn't leave? I asked, fighting the words as I said them, or letting them crash into my heart. 'It's not exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?

He frowned... with a grunt began to build down in his chest. 'I'm going to keep my promise. All the same and everything, Jenna'-the grunt has become more pronounced- is going to die.

'Soon... »

'Let's not hurry,' I said, trying to hide my panic. 'Maybe she won't come back. Maggie's pack probably scared her. There is no reason to go and get it.

Plus, I have bigger problems than Jenna. Marcel's eyes narrowed, all the same, and all he nodded. 'That's true. Werewolves are a problem.

I snorted. 'I wasn't talking about Marcel. My problems are much worse than a handful of teenage wolves who are in trouble.

Marcel seemed to be about to say something and then thought better of him.

His teeth clicked together, and he spoke through them. 'Really?' 'So what would be your biggest problem? This would make

Jenna is back for you seem to be a consequential question in comparison?

'How about the second largest? I covered up.

'Okay,' he accepted suspiciously. I took a break. I wasn't sure I could say the name. 'There are others who come to pick me up,' he reminds me with a hushed murmur.

He sighed anyway, and everything, the reaction was not as strong as I would have imagined after his answer to Jenna.

'Is the department only the second largest?

'You don't seem so upset about it,' I noted.

'Well, we have a lot of time to think about it. Time means something very different to them than to you or even me. They count the years as you count the days. I wouldn't be surprised if you were thirty years before crossing their mind again,' he added lightly.

Horror went through me.

thirty...???

His promises meant nothing in the end. If I were 30 one day, he might not have intended to stay long. The intense pain of this knowledge made me realize that I had already begun to hope, without allowing me to make S.O.

'You don't have to be afraid,' he says, anxiously watching the tears towing over the rims of my eyes. 'I'm not going to let them hurt you.

While you're here. Not that I cared about what happened to me when he left.

He took my face between his two stone hands, holding it firmly while his midnight eyes looked into mine with the gravitational force of a black hole. 'I will never leave you again.

'All the same, and everything, you say thirty,' he murmured. Tears covered the edge. 'What is it? You're going to stay, all the same, and all this, let me grow old anyway? It's true.

His eyes softened, while his mouth went hard. 'That's exactly what I'm going to do.

what choice do I have? I can't be without you, though, and all of you, I won't destroy your soul.

'Is it... I tried to keep my voice even, all the same, and everything, this question was too difficult. I remembered his face when Aron almost begged him to consider making me immortal. The sick are looking over there. Was this fixation to keep me human really on my soul, or was it because he wasn't sure he wanted me to stay that long?

'Yes?' he asked, waiting for my question.

I asked for another one.

Almost anything and everything, not quite as hard.

'All the same and all, what about when I'm so old that people think I'm your mother?

Your grandmother? My voice was pale with revulsion- I could see Gran's face again in the dream mirror.

His whole face was soft now.

He brushed the tears off my cheek with his lips. 'It means nothing to me,' he breathed against my skin. You'll always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course, he hesitated, flinching slightly. 'If you outsmarted me- if you wanted something more- I would understand that, Bell. I promise I won't stand in your way if you want to leave me.

His eyes were onyx liquid and quite sincere. He spoke as if he had put infinite amounts of thought into this asinine plan. 'You realize I'm going to die one day, don't you? I demanded...

He had thought about that part, too.

'I'll follow as soon as I can.

'It's serious... I found the right word.

'Sick!!!'

'Bell is the only road from right to left

'Let's come back for a minute,' I said.

feeling angry, it was so much easier to be clear,

decisive. 'You remember the

Department, isn't it? I can't be human

forever. They're going to kill me. Even if they don't

think about me until I'm 30, I've tightened up

the words, do you think they'll forget?

'No,' he replied slowly, shaking his head.

'They won't forget. All the same and all?

'All the same and all...?

He smiled when I looked at him
suspiciously.

Maybe I wasn't the only crazy one.

'I have some plans.

'And these plans,' said I, 'my voice
becomes more acidic with every word.' 'These
plans all around me remain human.

My attitude has hardened its expression.
'Of course. His tone was abrupt, his divine face
arrogant.

We shone for a long minute.

Then I took a deep breath, squared my
shoulders, pushed back his arms so I could sit
down.

'Do you want me to leave?' he asked,
'and it made my heart float to see that this idea

was hurting him, even though he was trying not to show it.

'No,' I said. 'I'm 19 years old.'

He looked at me suspiciously as I got out of bed and groped in the darkroom, looking for my shoes.

'Mary, I ask you where you are going,' he asked.

'I'm going to your house,' I said, feeling still blind.

He got up and came to my side. 'Here are your shoes. How did you intend to do that?

'My truck.'

'He's probably going to wake up

Jack, did he offer as a deterrent.'

I sighed. 'I know. All the same and everything, honestly, I'm going to be punished for weeks as it is. How much trouble can I get?

'None. He's going to be mad at me, not you.

'If you have a better idea, I'm all ears. 'Stay here,' he suggested, 'and his expression was not hopeful.'

No dice. All the same and all, you go ahead and make yourself at home,' I encouraged, surprised at how much my teasing sounded, and walked to the door.

He was there before me, blocking my way.

I frowned and turned to the window. It wasn't that far to the ground, and it was mostly grass underneath...

'Okay,' he sighed. 'I'll give you a ride. I shrugged. 'Anyway. All the same and everything, you should probably be there, too.

'And why is it? 'Because you are extraordinarily opinisable, and I'm sure you'll want a chance to express your opinions.

'My point of view on what subject? He asked through his teeth.

'It's not just about you anymore. You're not the center of the universe, you know. My world was, of course, a different story. 'If you want to bring the ministry down on us on something as

stupid as leaving me human, then your family
should have a say.

'A word in what?'

'My mortality. I'm putting him in the
polls.

-VOTE-

HE WAS NOT HAPPY, THAT
PLENTY IS FACILE TO READ about it
face. All the same and everything,
without any other argument, he took me in his
arms and jumped out my window, landing without
the slightest jolt, like a cat. It was a little lower
than I had imagined.

'All right,' said he, his voice bubbling
with disapproval.

'Upstairs, you're 1,20th.'

He helped me on my back and ran away.

Even after all this time, it was routine, easy.

It was something you had never
forgotten, like riding a bike.

It was so quiet and dark that he ran
through the forest, his breathing rather slow and
even dark as the trees flying in front of us were
almost invisible, and only the rush of air in my face
gave our speed. The air was moist; he did not burn
my eyes as the wind in the great place had, and it
was comforting.

As it was night, too, after that
terrifying brightness. Like the thick quilt I played
under as a child, the darkness felt familiar and
protective.

I remembered that running in the forest like this scared me, that I closed my eyes. It seemed like a silly reaction to me now. I kept my eyes wide, his chin resting on his shoulder, my cheek against his neck. The speed was exhilarating.

A hundred times better than the bike. I turned my face towards him and thought on my lips in the cold stone skin of his neck.

'Thank you,' said he, as the vague, black shapes of the trees passed before us.

'Does this mean that you have decided that you are awake?

I laughed. The sound was easy, natural, effortless. It looked good. 'Not really. More than that, anyway, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight.'

'I will gain your trust one way or another,' he murmured, especially to himself. 'If this is my last act.' I trust you, I assured him.

'It's me, I don't trust.

'Please explain this.

It had slowed down to a walk- I could tell because the wind stopped, and I guessed we were not far from home. I thought I might make the sound of the river rushing somewhere nearby in the dark.

I had a hard time figuring out the right way to formulate it. 'I don't trust myself to be... enough. To deserve you. There is nothing in me that can hold you back.

He stopped and reached around to remove me from his back. His soft hands did not

free me; after putting me back on his feet, he wrapped his arms tightly around me, hugging me to his chest.

'Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,' he murmured. 'Never doubt that.'

All the same and all, how could I not?

'You never told me...' he murmured.

'What is it?

'What's your biggest problem is.

'I'll give you a guess. I sighed and reached out to touch the tip of his nose with my index finger.

He nodded. 'I'm worse than the department,' he says sadly. 'I guess I deserved it.'

Part: 13

Why and why

I rolled my eyes. The worst the department can do is kill me.

He waited with tense eyes.

'You can leave me,' I said. 'The ministry, Jenna... they are nothing compared to that.'

Even in the darkness, I could see the anguish turning his face—he reminded me of his expression under Jane's torturing gaze; I felt sick and regretted telling the truth.

'Don't do it,' he whispered, touching his face.

'Don't be sad.'

He pulled a corner of his shy mouth, all the same, and the whole expression did not touch his eyes. 'If there was only one way to make you see that I cannot leave you,' he murmured. 'Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you.

I liked the idea of time.

'Okay,' he agreed.

His face was still tormented. I tried to distract him inconsequentially.

'So, since you're staying. Can I get my stuff back?' I asked, making my tone as light as I could handle.

My attempt worked, to some extent: he laughed. Nevertheless, and all, his eyes have retained misery. 'Your business has never gone away,' he told me. 'I knew it was wrong since I

promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, though, and all of that, I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the photos, the tickets, they're all under your floors.

'Really?

He nodded, seeming slightly applauded by my obvious pleasure in this trivial fact. It was not enough to completely cure the pain in the face.

'I think,' I said slowly, 'that I am not sure, all the same, and everything, I wonder.' I think maybe I knew that all the time.

'What did you know?

I just wanted to take the agony in his eyes, all the same, and everything, as I said the

words, they sounded truer than I expected they would.

'Part of me, perhaps my subconscious, never stopped believing that you still cared if I lived or died.

That is probably why I heard the voices.

There was a very deep silence for a while. 'Voice?' he asked categorically.

'Well, just one voice. It's a long story.

The suspicious look on his face made me wish I hadn't raised that. Would he think I was crazy, like everyone else? Was everyone right about that?

All the same and everything, at least that expression- the one that made it look like something burned it- faded away.

I've got time. His voice was exceptionally even. 'It's pretty pathetic.

He waited.

I wasn't sure how to explain myself. 'Do you remember what Olivia said about extreme sports?

He uttered the words without inflection or accent. 'You jumped off a cliff for fun.

Uh, that's all. And before that, with the motorcycle

'Motorcycle? I knew his voice well enough to hear something that was preparing behind the quiet. 'I guess I didn't mention Olivia about that part.

'Not!

'Well, about that... You see, I found that... when I was doing something dangerous or stupid... I remembered you more clearly,' I confessed, feeling completely mental. 'I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it like you were right there next to me. Most of the time, I tried not to think about you, and it didn't hurt so much that it was like you were protecting me again. Like you don't want me to get hurt.

'And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was that, below all this. I always knew that you had not stopped loving me.

Again, as I was speaking, the words brought with them a sense of conviction. That's right.

A deep place in me recognized the truth.

His words came out half strangled.

'You... were... risking your life... to hear-'

'Sh-h,' I interrupted him. Wait a second.

I think I'm going to have an epiphany here.

I thought about that night in

Pittsburgh when I had my first illusion. I'd have

two options. Madness or fulfillment of wishes.

I had not seen any third option.

All the same and everything, and if...

What if you thought something was

true, all the same, and all that, you were wrong?

What if you were so stubbornly without too many

thoughts, of course in everything, that you are

right, that you would not even consider the truth

and submit your realities?

Would the truth be silenced, or would it
attempt to unravel?

Third option: Marcel loved me. The bond
between us could not be broken by absence,
distance or time.

-And-

As no matter how much more special or
beautiful or brilliant or perfect than me, it could
be, it was as irreversibly altered as I was. As I
always belonged to him, it would always be mine.

Is that what I was trying to tell
myself?

« Oh!

« Bell?

'Oh, oh. All right. I see.

'Your epiphany is?' he asked, his voice uneven and tense with the grater.

'You love me,' I marveled. The feeling of conviction and waterproofing crossed me again.

Although his eyes were still anxious, the crooked smile I liked best flashed on his face.

'Really, I do.

My heart swelled like it was going to break my ribs. He filled my chest and blocked my throat so I couldn't talk.

He wanted me the way I wanted me forever. It was only fear for my soul, for human things that he did not want to take from me, which made him so desperate to leave me mortal. Compared to the fear he did not want from me, this obstacle- my soul- seemed almost insignificant.

He took my face tightly between his fresh hands and kissed me until I was so stunned the forest was spinning. Then he thought of himself against mine, and I wasn't the only one breathing harder than usual.

'You were better than me, you know,' he told me.

'Better at what?

'Surviving... At least you made an effort. You got up in the morning, you tried to be normal for Jack, you followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively followed, I was... useless. I couldn't be with my family, I couldn't be with anyone. I am embarrassed to admit that I more or less curled up in a ball and let the misery have me.

He smiles a little shyly. 'It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know, so am I.

I was deeply relieved that he seemed to understand- comforted that all this made sense to him. In any case, he didn't look at me like I was crazy. He looked at me like... he loved me.

'I have heard only one voice,' I corrected him.

He laughed, then pulled me tight against his right side and started driving me forward.

'I'm just humor you with that. He went wide with his hand towards the darkness in front of us as we walked. There was something pale and huge out there- the house I realized. 'It doesn't

matter what they say at all.' It affects them now, too.

He shrugged indifferent towards me, then led me through the open front door into the dark house and lit the lights; the room was exactly as I had remembered- the piano and the white sofas and the pale, massive staircase; no dust, no white sheets.

Marcel called the names without more volume that I would use in regular conversation.

'Joh?

Isla? Rose? Emmah, is that you? ray?
Olivia? They could hear.

Joh was suddenly standing next to me as if he had been there from the beginning. Welcome, Bell. He smiles: 'What can we do for you this

morning? I imagine, because of the weather, that this is not a purely social visit?

I nodded. 'I'd like to talk to everyone at once if it's okay.'

About something important.

I couldn't help but look at Marcel's face while I was talking. His expression was still critical and all resigned. When I looked at Joh, he was looking at Marcel too.

'Of course,' Joh says. Why not talk in the other room?

Joh led the way through the bright living room, at the corner of the dining room, and turned on the lights as he went. The walls were white, the ceilings high, like the living room. In the centre of the room, under the low hanging

chandelier, was a large polished oval table surrounded by eight chairs. Joh was holding a chair in my head.

I had never seen the Grange use the dining room table before it was just an accessory.

They did not eat in the house.

As soon as I turned to sit in the chair, I saw that we were not alone; Isla had followed Marcel, and behind her, the rest of the family fell.

Joh was sitting on my right, and Marcel on my left. All the others took their seats in silence. Olivia was smiling at me, already on the plot. Emmah and Ray looked curious, and Rose smiled at me tentatively. My reply smile was just as shy. It was going to take a little time to get used to it.

Joh nodded.

'The ground is yours.

Part: 14

Nervous

I swallowed. Their eyes made me nervous. Marcel took my hand under the table. I looked at him all the same, and everything, he was looking at the others, his fate suddenly ferocious.

'Well,' he said. I hope Olivia has already told you everything that has happened in

Va-t-il volterra?

'Everything,' Olivia assured me.

I gave him a meaningful look.

'And on the way?' That too,' she nodded.

'Well,' I sighed with relief.

'So we're all on the same page.'

They waited patiently while I tried to control my thoughts.

'So-o, I have a problem, I started.'

Olivia promised the department that I would become one of you. They'll send someone to check, and I'm sure that's a bad thing to avoid.

'And so, now it involves you all. I'm sorry about that. I looked at each of their beautiful faces, saving the most beautiful for the end. Marcel's mouth was turned into a grimace. 'All the same and everything, if you don't want me, then I'm not going to force myself on you, whether Olivia is ready or not.'

Isla opened her mouth to talk, all the same, and everything, I held a finger to stop him.

'Please let me finish. You all know what I want. And I'm sure you know what Marcel thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote if you decide you don't want me, so... I guess I'll go back to Italy alone, I can't bring them here. My crumpled forehead that I considered that way.

There was the slight rumble of a growl in Marcel's chest. I ignored it.

'Given, then, that I am not going to put any of you in danger, anyway, I want you to vote yes or no on the question of me becoming an angel. I smiled half on the last word and gestured towards

Joh for starters. 'Just for a minute,'
Marcel interrupted.

I was looking at him through the narrowed eyes. He raised his eyebrows at me, shaking my hand. 'I have something to add before I vote.

I sighed...
'About the danger, Bell is talking about him,' he said. 'I don't think we need to be too anxious.

His expression has become more animated. He put his free hand on the shiny table and thought forward.

'You see,' he said, looking around the table as he spoke, 'there was more than one reason why I didn't want to shake Aron's hand at

the end, there's something they didn't think about, and I didn't want dinner,' he smiled.

'Who was? Olivia pushed; I was sure my expression was as skeptical as the sisters.

'The department is overconfident, and rightly so. When they decide to find someone, it's not a problem. Remember Eamettri? He looked at me.

I shivered. He took that as a yes.

'He finds people- that's his talent, why they keep him.

'Now, all the time we were with one of them, I was choosing their brains for anything that could save us, get as much information as possible. I've seen how Eamettri's talent works. He's a tracker, a tracker a thousand times better

than Jarres. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aron does. He catches them... flavor? I don't know how to describe it... The tenor... of someone's mind, and then he follows that. It works over long distances.

'All the same and all, after Aron's little experiences, well... Marcel shrugged.

'You think he won't be able to find me, I said absolutely.

That was enough. 'I'm sure of it.'

It relies entirely on that other meaning.

When it doesn't work out with you, they'll all be blind.

'And how does that solve something?

'Absolutely, of course, Olivia will be able to tell when they are planning a visit, and I will

hide from you. They will be helpless,' he says with ferocious pleasure. 'It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!

He and Emmah exchanged a look and a smile.

It didn't make any sense. 'All the same, and all that, they can find you,' I reminded him.

'And I can take care of myself.'

Emmah laughed, and reached across the table towards her brother, laying a fist. 'Great plan, brother,' he says enthusiastically.

Marcel extended his arm to strike Emmaus' fist with his own.

'No,' cried Rose.

'Absolutely not,' I agreed.

That's nice. Ray's voice was grateful.

'Idiots,' Olivia whispered.

Isla just looked at Marcel.

I was standing in my chair, focused.

It was my meeting.

'All right, then, Marcel has offered you an alternative to consider,' I said coldly. 'vote. I looked at Marcel this time; it would be better to get his opinion from the road. 'Do you want me to join your family?

His eyes were as hard and dark as flint.

'Not that way.' You're still human.

I nodded once, keeping my business face, then moved on.

Olivia?

'Yes, it's true.'

Ray?

'Surely,' he said, 'he fell vocally.' I was a little surprised- I hadn't been at all sure about his vote. All the same and everything, I deleted my reaction and moved on.

Ross?

She hesitated, biting on her full and perfect lower lip. No, that's not it.

I kept my face empty and turned my head slightly to move forward, all the same, and everything, she held both her hands, palms forward.

'Let me explain,' she begged. 'I don't mean to say that I have an aversion to you as a sister. It's just that... this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there was someone to vote no for me.'

I nodded slowly, then turned to Emmah.

'Hell, Surly! He smiles. 'We can find another way to choose a fight with this Eamettri.

I was still grimacing when I looked at Isla.

'Yes, of course, girl. I already see you as part of my family.

'Thank you, Isla,' I murmured, turning to Joh.

I was suddenly nervous, wishing I had asked for his vote first. I was sure it was the vote that mattered most, the vote that mattered more than any majority.

Joh wasn't looking at me.

'Marcel,' he said.